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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000120

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SUBJECT: CHIEF ADVISER LAYS OUT AGENDA WITH NO ELECTION DATE

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. In a wide ranging address to the nation last night, Chief Adviser Ahmed declared his "main task" is to organize free, fair, peaceful, neutral, and broadly contested elections as soon as possible. However, he warned, elections outside a truly democratic environment would be meaningless, and thus he is committed to eradicating corruption, illicit money, and violence from politics. Reaction has been generally positive, though the Awami League again asked for a specific election date. Chief Adviser Ahmed's failure to mention an election date, a timeline for his ambitious agenda, or when the state of emergency might end, indicate the Caretaker Government (and the military behind it) intends to stay in office well beyond the early April timeframe the Awami League has suggested for elections.

End Summary.

Ahmed's Agenda

¶2. (SBU) Late January 21, in his first major public appearance since taking office on January 12, Caretaker Government Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed earnestly addressed the nation on television to outline his government's agenda. He pledged as his "main task" to organize free, fair, peaceful, and neutral elections in which all parties participate. He said elections would be "meaningless" unless a truly democratic environment were created, and promised to reconstitute the Election Commission, which he said had acted in a partisan manner. (Note: Controversial Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz resigned shortly before the speech; the other commissioners are expected to follow suit soon.)

¶3. (SBU) Ahmed also vowed maximum efforts to create a "flawless" voter list. On photo voter ID cards and transparent boxes, two demands raised by the Awami League with the last government, he undertook to examine them fully. He declared his government's determination to free politics of illicit money, thuggery, and corruption, and said "appropriate steps" would be taken to ensure that candidates verifiably disclose their assets and sources of income.

¶4. (SBU) Ahmed promised a revitalized Anti-Corruption Commission, additional steps to separate the judiciary from the executive, a neutral civil administration, action to reverse price rises and power shortages, and continued steps to improve law and order, which he described as a key ingredient for a successful election. He also expressed determination to "carry on operations against international extremism and terrorism," an apparent reference to the recent arrests of alleged operatives of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh, the banned terrorist organization responsible for the 2005 nationwide bombing campaign.

Reaction

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¶ 15. (SBU) Awami League Secretary General Abdul Jalil welcomed the speech, saying it vindicated his party's position against the previous Caretaker Government. He reiterated, however, his party's call for the setting of an election date as soon as possible. (Note: Awami League leaders have suggested an election in early April.) Business leaders also endorsed Ahmed's agenda, and civil society leaders who have campaigned for broad political reform hailed Ahmed's focus on the underlying causes of Bangladesh's dysfunctional political system.

¶ 16. (C) Formal reaction from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is expected later today. However, the Ambassador watched the speech at a dinner hosted by the former home minister of state Babar, along with party secretary general Manan Bhuiyan, and former foreign minister Morshed Khan; all glumly remarked afterwards, "There's no election date."

Comment

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¶ 17. (C) Bangladeshis have applauded the new Caretaker Government for saving the country, at least temporarily, from the agony of new political crisis and confrontation. In stark contrast to its predecessor, this Government has done what Bangladeshis expect from a good Caretaker Government: arresting thousands of alleged criminals and thugs across the political spectrum, regardless of due process; demoting or removing politically controversial senior civil servants; cracking down on illegal structures and squatters along major thoroughfares to facilitate vehicular and pedestrian

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movement; and visible action to promote neutrality in the electoral process.

¶ 18. (C) Few Bangladeshis would openly challenge any part of Ahmed's approach, but some have already focused on what he didn't say: a date for elections, a timeline for his ambitious agenda, a promise to modify or end the state of emergency, or indicate when political activities might be allowed to resume. Given the subterranean repute of Bangladeshi political leaders, the Caretaker Government has found it easy to get the popular benefit of the doubt, at least for now, but Ahmed's speech last night confirmed that his agenda (and that of his military backers) is much broader than simply preparing the country for elections as soon as logistically possible.

BUTENIS